

UC Merced Accelerated Medical Program on Track to Help Relieve Doctor Shortage in Central Valley

By Lt. Governor John Garamendi

[Calitics](#): In early January I proposed an accelerated medical education program at the University of California Merced designed to prepare high quality doctors and nurses for rewarding careers in the Central Valley. Yesterday at the UC Regents' meeting, UC President Mark Yudof committed to establishing a first class undergraduate medical education program at UC Merced, and he promised to continue the planning process for post-graduate medical education at the campus. The President's important commitment could be the important first step toward the accelerated medical school program I envision.

A medical program in the region will help address the serious health care problems of the San Joaquin Valley, home to the state's highest rates of childhood asthma and premature birth. A serious shortage of medical services exists in the Valley; there are 31 percent fewer primary care doctors, 51 percent fewer specialists, and fewer nurses than California as a whole. An estimated \$845 million dollars is lost annually in the region when Central Valley patients drive out of the area to receive medical care.

UC Merced's priority should be educating and preparing new doctors and nurses to fill the needs of the Valley. Entering freshmen recruited from San Joaquin Valley high schools would be prepared in Merced's world class undergraduate medical education program and immediately begin their medical training.

The program would run year round with no summer vacations. Lower division course work could be identical for students intending to become nurses or doctors. Upper division classes could begin to differentiate and specialize, so that students could pursue nursing or MD tracks. The program would be fully integrated with the regional community colleges.

After graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree, students on the MD track could take all the course work necessary to enter clinical rotations in the surrounding hospitals and clinics. The goal would be to put them significantly ahead of the traditional path.

Following the clinical rotations, students would be directed to the excellent hospitals and clinics in the area for their residency work. Since students in the program would still be required to pass all the same tests and licensing board requirements as a physician from a more traditional school, the program improves the value of pursuing an MD degree without sacrificing quality.

UC Merced already has many of the courses it will need for the first two years of a world class medical education program, and I believe its program could expand economically by partnering with community colleges in the region. Fine labs and other facilities are already at UC Merced, at the UC San Francisco medical complex in Fresno, and in many of the surrounding community colleges.

There is a great need in the San Joaquin Valley for specialized research on community health, public health, and diseases more often found in the Valley. This type of research is not necessarily expensive and would be a valuable and unique contribution of UC Merced. As the UCM campus grows and matures, the medical and nursing programs can follow the path of other UC medical schools and develop into world-class research institutions.

While I am proud to have helped spearhead this effort, it could not have been done without the hard work and dedication of a broad coalition of individuals interested in improving health care access for the Central Valley. Rep. Jim Costa, Rep. Dennis Cordoza, Assemblymember Cathleen Galgiani, UC Merced Chancellor Henry Kang, Bill Lyons, UC Merced Natural Sciences Dean Maria Pallavicini, Dr. Frederick Meyers, and hundreds of staff and community members have been ardent supporters of the school since its conception, forming the Valley Coalition for UC Merced Medical School to advocate on its behalf. I would also like to thank the Central Valley Health Network for their tireless support.

UC Merced is a young campus in need of expanding its reputation. A quality and cost-effective medical program will help improve the appeal of the entire campus, helping to retain and bring in new talent to the Valley from across professions.

Businesses are reluctant to move to regions with poor health services. The increased burden on business-subsidized insurance drives up costs, and the increased need for sick days decreases business efficiency and profitability. Improving health access in the Central Valley will improve the region's overall economy and increase tax revenues for state and local government.

Let's empower UC Merced to become a magnate school offering the most cost-effective high quality medical education in the nation, while at the same time offering homegrown solutions to the Valley's health care crisis. It's time for the Valley to heal itself.